The Devil's in the Details—or Is He? The Ethics and Politics of Terrorism Data

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Abstract

In the United States, domestic political violence has recently become a focal point of discourse among scholars, policy makers, journalists, politicians, and the public. This is in large part due not only to the recent increase in domestic terrorist plots and attacks by ideological extremists, but also to the recent civil unrest surrounding the COVID–19 lockdowns, Black Lives Matter protests, and the 2020 presidential election. As think tanks like New America and the Center for Strategic and International Studies have compiled data and produced reports to inform this discourse, they have made some serious missteps in their coding of data. Between omitting conflict events and miscoding the ideology of perpetrators in such a way as to obscure the violence of left-wing, Black separatist/nationalist/supremacist, and anti-White extremists, they unintentionally give the impression of political bias in their coding, thereby undermining their credibility in the eyes of a public that is increasingly skeptical of experts. This article identifies some of these data problems and discusses their implications.

Keywords: data, ethics, politics, Black Lives Matter, left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism

NB: This article discusses police brutality and the Black Lives Matter organization, and identifies as terrorism some actions by those affiliated with or influenced by the struggle for racial justice in the United States. This is not to suggest that BLM is a terrorist group (it is not), or that protesting and rectifying inequality is not important (it is). Rather than making normative claims about social movements, the author identifies problems in quantitative methodology, and uses objective criteria to assess events' status as terrorism.

Introduction

Studying terrorism is, in many ways, a numbers game: How many casualties? How many attacks? How many members in a group? Policy makers and academic experts rely on data to guide their thinking about terrorist threats.

But what if the data is wrong or incomplete?[1] This can have implications for both counterterrorism funding and efforts to counter violent extremism. In fact, in 2019, the US Senate's Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs heard proposed legislation, passed by the House of Representatives, "to require a joint domestic and international terrorism report" involving the collection of such data because of its importance to policy making.[2] Furthermore, skewed data can harm the credibility of terrorism experts and decrease the value of their analysis.

Two recent reports on terrorism in the United States contain several serious flaws that, while not deflecting from the most pressing terrorist threat facing the country—namely right-wing extremism—skew the picture and risks undermining public confidence in terrorism experts.[3]

First, in June 2020, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) released "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States," in which Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington argue that right-wing extremism is the greatest terrorist threat to the United States.[4] Central to their analysis is a data set of 893 *attacks and foiled plots* in the United States between January 1994 and May 8, 2020. They categorize the perpetrators' ideologies as right-wing (511 incidents), left-wing (222), religious (129), ethnonationalist (22),

and other (6).

A few months later, the policy think tank New America, previously the New America Foundation (NAF), updated its running report on "Terrorism in America after 9/11," which includes an interactive chart tracking *fatal terrorist attacks* in the US since September 11, 2001. Peter Bergen and David Sterman (and previously Albert Ford and Alyssa Sims) maintain(ed) the report, which groups terrorists' ideologies into five categories: Far Right Wing (43 incidents), Jihadist (19), Black Separatist/Nationalist/Supremacist (3), Ideological Misogyny/Incel (Involuntary Celibate) Ideology (3), and Far Left Wing (1).[5]

Both reports exhibit several serious problems in their data selection and coding. Aside from the problems inherent in choosing to only record fatal terrorist attacks (e.g., not capturing the full scope of terrorist activity), the New America data appears to omit disproportionately more left-wing attacks than right-wing or jihadist attacks and contains several miscoded events. The CSIS data on plots and attacks—a far more comprehensive methodology than "just" fatal incidents—also miscodes numerous cases, includes incidents whose status as "terrorism" is dubious, and excludes several right-wing and jihadist cases.

Such flaws, though unnoticeable to the casual observer, are problematic, not least because they violate research norms and erode public trust in terrorism experts. These examples also illustrate the need for all experts working with data to be cautious not only in their own data collection but also in their use of curated data sets.[6]

Gaps and Miscoding in New America's Data

The New America report excludes several fatal terrorist attacks in the United States that could be considered left wing. Although it also excludes numerous right-wing and ideological misogynist/incel attacks, the omission of potential left-wing (LWE), anti-White (AWE), and Black separatist/nationalist/supremacist (BSNS) attacks is disproportionately larger than the omission of others. These omissions and the miscoding of ideology raise questions about, at best, methodological rigor, and at worst, the implicit ideological biases of the data collectors, thereby undermining experts' credibility and playing into public mistrust of specialists.

Bergen et al., who describe their data as "comprehensive" and "up-to-date," claim that "those with Far-Left views have killed one person" in the United States since 9/11; based on their own data, they are correct: their data set only includes one such incident.[7]

Their data, however, do not reflect reality. Instead, several relevant cases of left-wing, anti-White, and Black separatist/nationalist/supremacist extremism have been completely excluded from the data set. Furthermore, a number of cases are miscoded as right-wing extremism.

While a substantial number of right-wing and incel incidents were also excluded from the NAF data, and these cases were, in terms of real numbers, more than double the number of excluded LWE, AWE, or BSNS incidents, the latter categories were disproportionately underrepresented when compared with the number already included in the data. With only four total incidents of LWE, AWE, and BSNS in the original NAF data, the addition of up to seven cases represents a 175% increase, whereas the introduction of about 18 RWE incidents (depending on how one counts them) into the data, which already had 43 such cases, represents a 41.86% increase. A disproportionate number of incel attacks are also excluded from the NAF data, but their exclusion does not carry the same potential impression of political bias; as such, these and the missing RWE cases are detailed in the Appendix.

Because of both their disproportionate underrepresentation in the data, and the need to consider these incidents' status as terrorism, we examine relevant cases of left-wing, anti-White, or BSNS violence that are excluded from the NAF data here:

In a "one-man war" against police, **Christopher Monfort**, a "left-wing constitutionalist," firebombed four police cars on October 22, 2009, and shot two officers, killing one on October 31 in Seattle, Washington.[8] He sought to avenge victims of police brutality, warning in a note left at the scene of the firebombing that law enforcement should "Start policing each other or get ready to attend a lot of police funerals."[9] Despite his insanity plea, Monfort was found guilty of aggravated first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison, where he committed suicide in January 2017.[10]

On December 20, 2014, **Ismaaiyl Brinsley** shot his ex-girlfriend in Baltimore, Maryland, took a bus to Brooklyn, New York, and shot and killed two on-duty New York City Police Department officers "execution style" before killing himself.[11] Earlier that day, Brinsley posted on Instagram that "I'm putting wings on pigs today. They take 1 of ours, let's take 2 of theirs," followed by the hashtags "#Shootthepolice," "#RIPErivGarner" (sic.), and "#RIPMikeBrown."[12] Brinsley reportedly was never an activist, but his post indicates he was motivated by anti-police ideology.[13]

Lakeem Scott, a Black man, went on a shooting spree in Bristol, Tennessee on July 7, 2016, killing one and injuring four others, including himself and a police officer. Witnesses claimed to hear Scott shouting "Police suck! Black lives matter!" during the attack.[14] He later admitted that "It was nothing personal. I am just tired of seeing my people killed."[15]

Former US Marine **Gavin Long** ambushed police officers on July 17, 2016 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He killed three officers and wounded three more before they killed him.[16] Long, a person of color, wrote before the attack that "I must bring the same destruction that bad cops continue to inflict upon my people, upon bad cops as well as good cops," to force the system to change. He characterized his attack as "a sacrifice for my people."[17] Long had previously expressed revolutionary ideas, praising the killing of police officers in Dallas 10 days prior and asserting on video that "it's going to take . . . Revenue and blood" to change the system, dismissing protestors as unserious.[18] Prior to the attack, Long publicly denied affiliation with any group.[19] He appears, however, to have considered himself a Sovereign Citizen, part of the Washitaw Nation (Washitaw de Dugdahmoundyah [Washitaw Moorish Nation]), despite denials by the Black separatist group's leadership.[20]

On August 18, 2017, **Everett Miller** shot and killed two Kissimmee, Florida police officers. Miller, a former Marine, had repeatedly posted anti-police and anti-White messages on social media under an alias.[21] Hours before the shooting, Miller wrote "Am I the only one. [Expletive] a Cop...Racist [Expletive]"[22] and urged his fellow African Americans to "Shoot back!"[23] Although Miller was in poor mental health at the time of the killing, he was found guilty.[24]

Fredrick Demond Scott, a Black man, was charged in a string of six murders of White people between 2016 and 2017 in Kansas City, Missouri.[25] Scott, who suffers from schizophrenia, threatened in 2014 to commit a school shooting and "kill all White people."[26] Investigators have yet to announce a motive in the killings.[27]

While driving his father's pickup truck on July 3, 2020 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, **Daniel Navarro**, a Mexican-American man, intentionally struck a White motorcyclist, killing him. Navarro explained to police that he believed all Harley drivers were White and racist, and that, as he told one law enforcement officer, "if President Donald Trump and White people are going to create the world we are living in, he [Navarro] has no choice and people are going to have to die."[28] He has been charged with hate crimes, but he was found mentally incompetent to stand trial in January 2021, though he is considered "likely to regain competency."[29]

Why might these cases have been excluded from the New America data? The coders may not view some of them as terrorist attacks on grounds of the perpetrators' mental health, but this seems inconsistent, as they include several such cases (e.g., Dylann Roof).[30] Given that several of these cases have clear motives—at least in terms of their targets, even if the exact ideology remains unclear—they are just as worthy of inclusion as Roof's massacre.

It is also worth noting that, although Roof's attack is included, some other apparent hate crimes, like the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, are not, perhaps because the coders do not consider them terrorist acts.[31] While the reasons for this are not entirely clear, it could explain the exclusion of some of the aforementioned anti-White attacks, especially those by Fredrick Scott and Daniel Navarro.

Even with these caveats, most of these cases are clear terrorist attacks.

The Global Terrorism Database's (GTD) three terrorism criteria are useful here. Although New America does not explicitly employ GTD's criteria, it fails to provide *any* explanation of its methodology. By GTD standards, at least two of these criteria must be present for an event to count as terrorism.[32]

First, "the act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal." Monfort, Brinsley, Lakeem Scott, Long, and Miller all indicated a clear desire to kill police officers in response to police brutality. Navarro (and possibly Fredrick Scott) sought to kill White people on behalf of people of color.

Second, "there must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims." Their various statements indicate that Monfort, Brinsley, Long, and Miller intended to communicate a message of resistance to the police and to fellow people of color.

Third, "the action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities." Each attack targeted noncombatants, and therefore were not legitimate warfare activities.

These cases clearly should have been included in the data, with the possible exception of Fredrick Scott, given the confused nature of his case.

While some of the attacks were not explicitly left wing and may be considered racial violence, several are certainly examples of left-wing extremism. For example, Monfort was a "left-wing constitutionalist" whose attack lacked an apparent racial motive.[33] Brinsley, Lakeem Scott, and Gavin Long's actions were explicitly tied to race and policing, and occurred during the first stage of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is essentially left wing, whether one considers that the broad movement is essentially progressive or that the Black Lives Matter organization's leaders are self-described "trained Marxists".[34] In fact, because of what some saw as a connection between the movement and the killings, the BLM organization explicitly condemned Ismaaiyl Brinsley's murder-suicide in 2014 and Micah Johnson's attack on Dallas police officers in July 2016 (discussed below).[35] Furthermore, a spate of ambushes on police officers in 2016 caused the group no small deal of anxiety.[36]

Though of course the BLM organization cannot be held responsible for violence it explicitly condemns and to which it is not directly linked, it is difficult to dissociate the attacks from the sociopolitical atmosphere in which they occurred, especially since several of the killers stated their motives.[37] It is possible, therefore, to consider Ismaaiyl Brinsley and Lakeem Scott's attacks left-wing extremism, though these might fall under the label of single-issue terrorism, given their retaliatory nature.

Regardless of whether those attacks should have been considered left-wing extremism or racial violence, they were not even coded in the NAF data. Why they were not remains unclear, though we will consider this further below.

Beyond these missing cases, Bergen et al.'s coding is inconsistent. While they define right-wing extremism as "anti-government, militia, White supremacist, and anti-abortion violence," the data set considers Black separatist/nationalist/supremacist extremism and left-wing extremism to be separate categories.

This creates two problems. First is nuance. On the one hand, parsing Black nationalism from left-wing extremism is a good distinction, as not all Black nationalists or supremacists are left-leaning (e.g., Louis Farrakhan).[38] On the other hand, Bergen et al. fail to provide similar nuance when examining right-wing extremists, lumping them together instead.

Although they are usually on the Right of the political spectrum, White supremacists, anti-government extremists, militia members, and anti-abortion terrorists often have vastly different and sometimes contradictory motivations and should not be conflated.

This is especially evident in the case of **Eric Frein**, who killed a Pennsylvania state trooper and wounded another in 2014.[39] In a letter to his parents, Frein wrote that:

> Our nation is far from what it was and what it should be. I have seen so many *depressing changes made in my time that I cannot imagine what it must be like for you*. There is so much wrong and on so many levels only passing through the crucible of another revolution *can get us back the liberties we once had*. I do not pretend to know what that revolution will look like or even if it would be successful.[40]

The NAF records Frein's attack as right-wing. While this is certainly possible given his reference to "depressing changes made in my time" and his pining for "the liberties we once had," this is the only publicly available evidence that suggests—but does not confirm—an ideological leaning; after all, he might be a left-leaning libertarian, given his lack of specificity as to *which* changes were "depressing," but we simply cannot tell based on his letter.

Other cases of anti-government extremists, like that of anti-tax terrorist Joseph Andrew Slack, are not clear-cut in terms of where a perpetrator falls on the politico-ideological spectrum.[41] While NAF codes Slack as a right-wing extremist, the manifesto he left behind expressed a litany of views that could, as a whole, not be classified as clearly left or right wing. For example, he railed against corporations, the Roman Catholic Church, and the American legal system, while also roundly criticizing the government and its tax code, all of which constituted "the real American nightmare."[42] Automatically recording such attacks as right-wing draws an ideological distinction where there is none.

Similarly, Bergen et al. miscode Roy Den Hollander's attack on the family of Judge Esther Salas in July 2020 as right wing, when it appears to have been motivated by his ideological misogyny.[43] Furthermore, the NAF data records Hesham Mohamed Hadayet's attack on the El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport in July 2002 as jihadist, when he was really motivated by a desire to influence American policy toward the Palestinian people.[44] His attack would be better coded as ethnonationalist, since there was no apparent jihadist motive behind it.

Second, one of the three cases classified in the NAF data as Black separatist/nationalist/supremacist extremism could also be coded as left-wing extremism. On July 7, 2016, **Micah Johnson**, a Black man and former Army reservist, launched an attack at a Black Lives Matter protest in Dallas, Texas, killing five police officers and wounding nine others and two civilians.[45] Johnson demonstrated an affinity for Black Power groups like the

New Black Panther Party,[46] which is technically Leftist, given its condemnation of capitalism and its aim of implementing an *ujamaa* (cooperative economics) system.[47] Though he was not affiliated with any group and it is not entirely clear which, if any, radicalized him, Johnson's interest in Black Lives Matter, the New Black Panthers, and the Black Riders Liberation Party indicates some Leftist influence, though it is possible that he only drew the anti-police elements from each.

The ambiguity in this and other cases starkly highlights the need for greater nuance in the NAF's coding scheme for terrorist ideology. Creating more nuanced ideological categories would generate a more detailed and comprehensive view of terrorism in the United States. Furthermore, this would keep other attacks by ideological outliers from falling through the cracks. For example, **Connor Betts**, the perpetrator of a mass killing in Dayton, Ohio in August 2019, openly exhibited Leftist beliefs, but was also profoundly misogynistic.[48] He allegedly kept a "hit list" and a "rape list," and sang about sexual violence and murdering women in a pornogrind band.[49] Investigators have yet to determine a clear motive.[50] While it would be wrong to code Betts's ideology without knowing all the facts, it seems it could be recorded as "mixed" or "unknown" for the time being, rather than excluding the attack entirely.

Miscoding in the CSIS Data

Whereas the NAF's data are, in part, miscoded and have significant omissions, the CSIS data (obtained by request) are fairly thorough—indeed, they include most of the aforementioned attacks—but have numerous miscoded incidents and some questionable definitions of what constitutes terrorism. The miscoding seems to be largely the result of the coders' reliance upon other data sets, often without cross-checking those sources.[51]

First, despite the expansiveness of the CSIS data, Jones et al. excluded a total of 19 incidents that should have been included, 17 of which were driven by right-wing ideologies (the other two were jihadist). See the Appendix to this article for more.

Second, although CSIS is more consistent than NAF, in that its left-wing and right-wing categories are equally broad, it clearly miscodes the ideology of more than forty incidents, and includes scores of events whose characterization as terrorist actions is dubious. Although we cannot review all the miscodings here, a few examples will suffice.

In March 1994, the office of the *Cincinnati Herald*, a Black newspaper, was firebombed after publishing a guest column that criticized African American Muslims. The day prior to the attack, the newspaper received a phone call explicitly threatening violence over the piece. No arrest was ever made, but the details of the case suggest an Islamist or jihadist (i.e., religious) motive behind the attack, and yet the CSIS data considers it a right-wing incident.[52]

As noted above, Eric Frein lacked a clear ideology beyond his broadly anti-government stance; but while NAF coded him as right-wing, CSIS considered him left-wing, citing his aim of "revolution." Nothing about his letter, however, suggests leftist sentiments.

Similarly, Jones et al.'s data miscodes the 2001 Amerithrax attacks as right-wing terrorism, even though the accused (but unproven) perpetrator, **Dr. Bruce Ivins**, displayed no discernible ideological motive.[53] Such a clear motive was also lacking in the case of two letters with unidentified powder mailed to Internal Revenue Service (IRS) offices—both coded as right-wing extremism, despite a lack of publicly available detail regarding the contents of said letters—and in the case of a ricin-tainted letter sent to then-Senate Majority Leader Bill

Frist (R-TN) in 2004, which could not be clearly connected to a discrete ideology, but which CSIS coded as left-wing.[54]

Given their lack of clear ideological affiliation, Ivins and Frein would have been better coded as "other" or "unknown/unclear," rather than as left or right wing. Indeed, in a more recent brief, Jones et al. categorize anti-government groups like the Boogaloo movement as "other," which is far more responsible, given that the movement attracts adherents from across the ideological spectrum.[55]

There are several other notable examples of miscoding in the CSIS data. For example, **Naveed Haq** attacked a Jewish organization's headquarters in Seattle in July 2006. The event is coded as right-wing extremism, even though Haq declared the attack made him a "jihadi," explaining to a 911 dispatcher that "These are Jews and I'm tired of . . . [Muslims] getting pushed around . . . in the Middle East."[56] Similarly, **Christopher Monfort's** 2009 attacks on police were also coded as right wing, even though Monfort was a "left-wing constitutionalist."[57] Six cases best classified as driven by ideological misogyny and/or incel ideology were coded as right-wing in the CSIS data, even though the data set had an incel classification available. While many of these individuals also held racist views, their online postings, manifestos, and target selection imply that incel ideology and/or ideological misogyny, not right-wing ideology, drove them to their acts.[58]

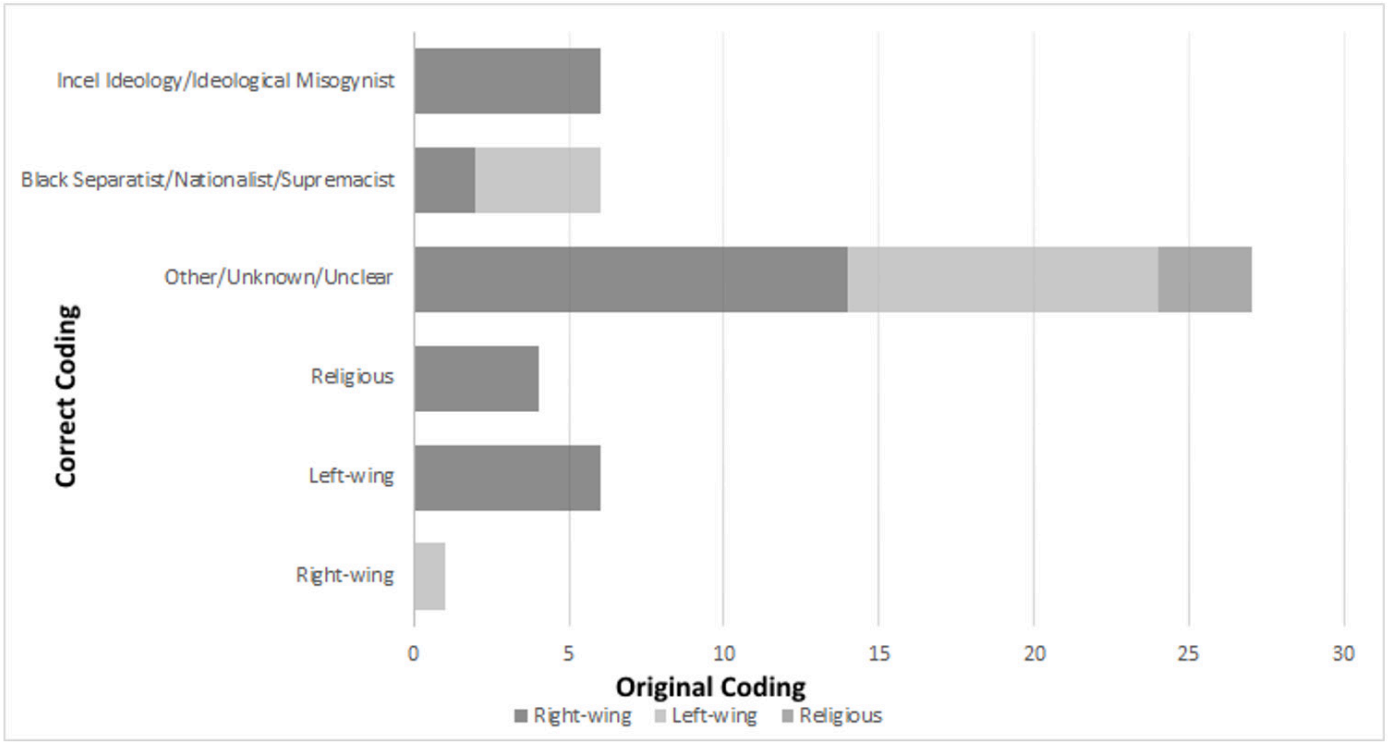
Bizarrely, some perpetrators' ideology was coded as directly the opposite of what the data set's description of the attack indicates. For example, in 2012, Floyd Corkins attacked the headquarters of the Family Research Council because of the group's opposition to gay marriage and gay rights, yet this was coded as right-wing extremism.[59] In another case, four Black assailants kidnapped and tortured a mentally ill adolescent, livestreaming the act while yelling "fuck Trump" and "fuck White people," only to be coded as right-wing extremism.[60] Conversely, Marshall Leonard bombed a Wal-Mart in Mississippi because it *stopped* selling the state flag that, until 2020, contained the Confederate battle flag, yet the attack is coded as left-wing extremism.[61]

Overall, of the 43 cases of apparent miscoding of ideology, 32 cases were misreported as right-wing extremism (accounting for 6.26% of right-wing events in the CSIS data), 15 as left-wing extremism (6.75%), and three as religious extremism (2.33%) (see Figure 1). Taken as a proportion of all miscoded cases, 64% of events were miscoded as right wing, 30% as left wing, and 6% as religious.

There are scores of potential hate crimes in the CSIS data that lack an identified perpetrator (let alone their ideological inclinations), and yet are reflexively coded as right-wing extremism. Even those few cases in which the perpetrators left some indication of their ideological inclinations can only reveal so much; for example, graffiti left at the scene of an arson of a predominantly Black church in Florida included a swastika and the words "Allahu Akbar," Arabic for "God is great."[62] The inclusion of what is popularly perceived as a jihadist slogan suggests the potential for false-flag attacks, especially in cases where the actors remain unknown.[63] Conversely, a jihadist might burn a synagogue and leave racist symbology at the scene, in hopes of throwing authorities off his trail. As such, even potential ideological markers left at the scene must be cautiously interpreted. Where no strong indication of ideological motive can be found, it is best not to assume one.

This is especially important considering that some acts that might qualify as hate crimes are simply cases of vandalism unmotivated by ideology or are even unintentional. For example, members of a band blew up the newspaper box of the *Rainbow Times*, an LGBTQ publication in Salem, Massachusetts, in August 2016. Although never charged with hate crimes, and despite the fact that the defendants simply sought to commit an act of vandalism, not to target that specific publication—choosing that newspaper box simply because it was unlocked—Jones et al. code this event as right-wing extremism.[64] Earlier that year, a woman in a Target store restroom set off an explosion when she attempted to mix a volatile combination of chemicals together in an attempt to get high. The blast, however, was initially assumed to be retaliation for the corporation's new policy allowing transgender customers to use the lavatory of their choice, and was therefore coded as right-wing extremism, even though the real story behind the explosion, demonstrating that it was not terrorism of any sort, came out within months of the event.[65]

Figure 1: *Miscoding in the CSIS Data*



***Note*:** "Original Coding" indicates what these events were *mis*coded as in the CSIS data, whereas "Correct Coding" indicates what they should have been coded as. There is also no "Black Separatist/Nationalist/Supremacist" category in the CSIS data set. Although the data set contains "Incel" as an ideological category, the graphics in the CSIS brief do not show these cases. Similarly, there is an "Other" category in the CSIS data, and while this could be used for "Unknown/Unclear," this has its own problems, as "Other" does not provide the same degree of uncertainty that "Unknown/Unclear" does. I have combined these last two categories for simplicity here, but they are distinguished in the data on which this chart is based. The data on which this chart is based is archived at https://doi.org/10.18738/T8/DTEJOC.

The CSIS data also includes several incidents that some have interpreted as hate crimes, but which law enforcement has not confirmed as such, as in the killing of a Sikh businessman in 2015, an alleged assault on two gay men in 2016 (later countered by claims that one of them started the fight), and the murder of a transgender sex worker in 2018.[66] While hate crimes certainly *can* be terrorist acts, the fact that none of these have been officially declared hate crimes—nor, more importantly, have the perpetrators or their motives been identified—belies their classification as right-wing extremism.

Even if an attack is a hate crime, that does not necessarily make it terrorism. For example, there are several cases in the CSIS data that involve racially motivated assault and battery, but which one would normally be hard-pressed to define as terrorism. While the CSIS brief's methodology paper explicitly includes hate crimes involving actual physical violence or the threat thereof, its definition of "terrorist incidents as those in which non-state actors used real or threatened violence to achieve a political goal and produce broad psychological impact" raises the question of how some of the hate crimes included in the data set meet that standard, when a political goal is often unclear.[67] In any case, one wonders how hate crimes (an overwhelmingly right-wing phenomenon) are treated as terrorism, when other cases of more explicitly political violence—like the 2014 riots in Ferguson, Missouri or the alleged assault on a conservative journalist in Portland, Oregon by Antifa adherents in 2019—are excluded from the data.[68]

While one could argue some of this violence is more spontaneous than several of the hate crimes in the data, there are several flaws in such reasoning: (a) the CSIS methodology paper makes no reference to intent or planning as factors in coding decisions; (b) several of the incidents that are obvious hate crimes (e.g., the beating to death of a Hispanic man by drunk high school football players) are also spontaneous in nature, and yet are included; and (c) there are some events, like the throwing of a smoke grenade at the White House during an Occupy protest, which are included in the data.

At any rate, even if hate crimes should be included in data sets on terrorism—and it is not clear that this is the case—those which are not directly traceable to a perpetrator or an ideology should not be coded as one ideology or the other.[69] Such assumptions inject an inappropriate degree of subjectivity into the data, creating new "facts" that are subsequently cited and propagated in other work on the subject.

Why It Matters and What Comes Next

One might argue that this is all mere academic navel-gazing. Who cares about a few differences in attack coding?

It is important to code these events properly for several reasons. First and foremost, it is wrong to do otherwise because it is false. Analysts, policy makers, and the public rely on such data, often taking them at face value. It is incumbent upon data curators to be scrupulous in their collection and coding, particularly when building a data set classifying attacks by ideology, which is an inherently political exercise (though not necessarily a *politicized* one). Even if an attack cannot be clearly identified as fitting cleanly into an ideology, that ambiguity does not mean it should be excluded—rather, it should be coded as "unclear," "unknown," or perhaps "mixed," as suggested above. These examples, furthermore, serve to remind terrorism experts and others working with data to approach curated data sets critically.

Second, it seems these events have been on the rise, as political violence has increased in the American context.[70] Perpetrators have recently targeted police officers and White civilians more frequently and explicitly, as seen in the ambush of two Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies on September 12, 2020, an attack on a Lancaster, Pennsylvania officer earlier that day, and the shooting of two policemen during protests in Louisville, Kentucky two weeks later.[71]

Finally, excluding or miscoding events undermines public trust in terrorism experts by erasing nuance and suggesting bias. While the coding decisions of Bergen et al. and Jones et al. are not necessarily the result of partisanship, the miscoding and exclusion of relevant events draws attention to right-wing extremism—which is a serious problem—but deflects attention from left-wing extremism, anti-White extremism, and Black separatism/nationalism/supremacism, giving the impression of biased data.

This impression of bias—inadvertent though it may be—is heightened by the fact that Bergen is an analyst at CNN and his coauthor, David Sterman, has been critical of former President Donald Trump.[72] As an academic who has rightly highlighted Trump's connection to the increase in right-wing extremism, Seth Jones is also likely to be dismissed by conservatives (especially of the anti-intellectual variety) as simply another example of liberal bias in academia.[73] Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with criticizing the president or being affiliated with a particular news outlet or university. But when coupled with inaccuracies like those detailed in this article, such affiliations and criticisms can inadvertently buttress claims by those who would rather dismiss experts as political hacks than take their warnings about right-wing extremism seriously.

None of this means that the NAF and CSIS reports' overarching conclusions are wrong; indeed, they are right to label right-wing extremism as the greatest domestic terrorist threat in the United States. The disproportionate under- and miscoding of left-wing attacks and the tendency to overrepresent right-wing attacks, however, highlights analysts' duty to guard against bad data and personal bias.

How can analysts of terrorism—academic or otherwise—avoid some of the problems outlined above?

First, the use of broad ideological categories may be politically savvy, but it can ultimately obscure important nuances, lumping together groups of actors who otherwise might not associate with one another. For example, an anti-abortion extremist would not necessarily identify with the Aryan Brotherhood, just as a Black Hebrew Israelite might not consider himself part of the Antifa movement. There was, rightly, uproar when the FBI began grouping all racially motivated terrorism together, effectively equating Black separatist/nationalist/supremacist extremism with White supremacism—why then should other unrelated ideologies be lumped together?[74]

Second, data collection practices should be rigorous. While it is acceptable to borrow from other data sets, as the CSIS report did extensively, we should not assume that all such data are correct. Instead, other curated data sets should be used as a foundation, and checked to ensure accuracy, especially because the initial reporting on a case may not always be right. Court documents and perpetrator manifestos are especially helpful in gaining insight into the motives behind an attack, and tend to be more reliable than media reporting.

Additionally, this article suggests the difficulties and dangers of coding perpetrators' ideology, which is best assessed qualitatively. Not only is ideology often complex and not always easily determined, but it can also be unclear or mixed; for example, many incels and ideological misogynists are also racist, sometimes even against their own ethnicity.[75] An ideology also might not fit into one's preconceived notions of how ideologies should be delineated (e.g., the Left–Right political binary). We would do well to code ideologies with as much nuance as possible.

Furthermore, in cases where a perpetrator's ideology is unclear or mixed—and especially in which the perpetrator is unknown or an attack goes unclaimed, as is the case with many attacks globally—it is not appropriate to speculate.[76] The CSIS data set, for example, is rife with speculation in scores (if not hundreds) of cases where the identity of the attacker remains unknown, but the ideology is inferred from the target. While this is understandable, it assumes too much—for example, is an unidentified anti-abortion extremist motivated by right-wing beliefs, his religion, or both? Did someone firebomb a synagogue because he is a Neo-Nazi, a Christian extremist, or a jihadist? Is an attack on a mosque motivated by militant secularism, nativism, traditionalism, radical Jewish beliefs, or something else? Every case like this in the CSIS data is reflexively coded as right-wing extremism. While the majority of such coding decisions are probably correct, so many of them are made in cases where the perpetrator is unknown that the coding of ideology is often based on assumption rather than on legitimate indicators of motive.

Third and finally, applying the label "terrorism" to racial or political violence carries substantial rhetorical baggage. One should therefore strive to clearly explain how terrorism is defined. If one considers violent hate crimes to be terrorism, why? If one considers verbal or written threats to be terrorism, why? Does one include verbal threats from all actors, or just from those on the Right—and why? Is all violent action associated with extremists automatically terrorism? For example, if White supremacists kill someone while robbing a bank to fund their group, that does not necessarily fit definitions of terrorism that require an audience beyond the immediate victims.[77] Similarly, one would not usually consider the murder of a sexual predator to constitute terrorism—but if the perpetrator did it for extreme ideological reasons, like being a White supremacist, does that make it terrorism? After all, they likely see such violence as making them more acceptable to the public, enhancing their movement's legitimacy by removing some of the most reviled individuals from society.[78]

These are questions one must address in a methodology section or an addendum to a report like NAF's which claims to be "comprehensive," and yet does not even include a basic discussion of selection criteria.

New America and the Center for Strategic and International Studies are among the most reputable think tanks in the security studies community, and their publications have significant cachet with academics, government officials, the news media, and the general public. Unfortunately, as this article has demonstrated, such trust is violated when some of the data used in major reports prove faulty. No data set is perfect, nor will one ever be, simply because they are made by flawed humans, or by programs designed by those same humans. But that does not mean we should not do our best to check our biases at the door and do our due diligence to ensure that our data are as accurate and honest as possible.

Just as it is best for judges to "avoid all . . . appearance of impropriety," so too should subject matter experts shun such appearances, especially in discussing such a politically charged topic as terrorism.[79] Our credibility depends on it.

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Notes

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Appendix: *Missing Cases from CSIS and NAF Data Sets*

Attack Name/s	Date/s	Location	Perpetrator/s	Ideology	Missing In
9/11 Revenge*	9/15–10/4/2001	Dallas, TX	Mark Anthony Stroman	right-wing	CSIS
Tulsa Bank Robbery	5/24/2004	Tulsa, OK	Wade Lay, Christopher Lay	right-wing	CSIS
New Bedford Rampage	2/2/2006	New Bedford, MA	Jacob D. Robida	right-wing	NAF
John Ditullio	3/23/2006	New Port Richey, FL	John Ditullio	right-wing	CSIS
Reno Homeless Killing	9/3/2007	Reno, NV	Christopher Maciolek, Findley Fultz	right-wing	CSIS
Murder of Marcelo Lucero	11/8/2008	Patchogue, NY	Multiple (7)	right-wing	NAF
Woodburn Bank Robbery	12/12/2008	Woodburn, OR	Joshua Turnidge, Bruce Turnidge	right-wing	CSIS
George Sodini	8/4/2009	Collier Township, PA	George Sodini	Incel	NAF
Pittsburgh Police Ambush	4/4/2009	Pittsburgh, PA	Robert Poplawski	right-wing	CSIS
Murder of Neil Hayes†	6/30/2009	Carmichael, CA	Charles Francis Gaskins	right-wing	CSIS
Murder of Edward Keeley†	8/28/2009	North Palm Springs, CA	Steven Banister, Travis Cody	right-wing	CSIS
Gun Range Murder	7/21/2010	Carlisle, PA	Raymond Peake	right-wing	CSIS
Ross Muehlberger	4/20/2010	Wichita Falls, TX	Ross Muehlberger	right-wing	CSIS
Peter Avsenew	12/23/2010	Wilton Manors, FL	Peter Avsenew	right-wing	CSIS
Murder of James Craig Anderson	6/26/2011	Jackson, MS	Multiple (10)	right-wing	CSIS
St. John Deputy Killings	8/16/2012	LaPlace, LA	Multiple (6)	right-wing	CSIS
LAX Shooting	11/01/2013	Los Angeles, CA	Paul Ciancia	right-wing	NAF
Murder of Charles Parker†	7/21/2013	Jonesville, NC	Jeremy Moody, Christine Moody	right-wing	CSIS
Vaughn Foods Attack	9/24/2014	Moore, OK	Alton Nolen	Jihadist	CSIS
Wayne Comm. College Attack	4/13/2015	Goldsboro, NC	Kenneth M. Stancil III	right-wing	NAF
Erick Shute	6/13/2015	Great Cacapon, WV	Erick Shute	right-wing	NAF
Umpqua Comm. College Massacre	10/1/2015	Roseburg, OR	Chris Harper	Incel	NAF
Dan J. Popp	3/6/2016	Milwaukee, WI	Dan J. Popp	right-wing	NAF
Murder of Khalid Jabara	8/12/2016	Tulsa, OK	Stanley Majors	right-wing	NAF
Wasil Farooqui	8/20/2016	Roanoke, VA	Wasil Farooqui	Jihadist	CSIS
Murder of Samuel Hardrix	8/21/2016	Fort Wayne, IN	Aaryn Snyder	right-wing	NAF
Olathe Bar Attack	2/22/2017	Olathe, KS	Adam W. Purinton	right-wing	NAF
Montana Traffic Stop Attack	5/16/2017	Three Forks, MT	Lloyd Barrus, Marshall Barrus	right-wing	NAF/CSIS
Baton Rouge Attacks	9/12/2017	Baton Rouge, LA	Kenneth J. Gleason	right-wing	NAF

Veterans Affairs Home Attack	5/16/2017	Murfreesboro, TN	John D. Carothers	right-wing	NAF
Joden Rocco	8/19/2018	Pittsburgh, PA	Joden Rocco	right-wing	NAF
Ronald Lee Kidwell	7/6/2018	Shawnee, KS	Ronald Lee Kidwell	right-wing	CSIS
Venezuela Plot Murder-Robbery	4/3/2018	Estero, FL	Alex J. Zwiefelhofer, Craig A. Lang	right-wing	CSIS
QAnon Mafia Murder	3/13/2019	Staten Island, NY	Anthony Comello	right-wing	NAF
William Shutt‡	3/27/2019	St. Petersburg, FL	William Shutt	right-wing	NAF
Gilroy Garlic Festival Massacre	7/28/2019	Gilroy, CA	Santino W. Legan	right-wing	NAF

Note: This appendix was created by cross-referencing the NAF and CSIS data sets with one another; as such, this is not a comprehensive or exhaustive list of the attacks excluded from both, but rather gives a sense of missing cases.

*Three separate attacks on September 15, September 21, and October 4, 2001. Would be coded as three incidents in CSIS, whereas NAF only coded it as one.

†Killing of registered/alleged sex offender(s) by White supremacists for ideological reasons.

‡Dubious connection—a police officer claimed in court that Shutt had Alt-Right ties, but the judge did not permit them to explain.